

## The Oracle at Glencolumbkille: Short story for BBC Radio 4

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From *The Homeric Hymen to Apollo*

Apollo, remember that that time you ranged the length of the planet  
Seeking a site for your Oracle's temple? First you looked to Piéria  
down the track from Olympos. Then sandy Lectos and Lélantine plain  
Telphousa's forest was pleasing but she warned you about the racket  
of horses and donkeys, sending you away to Ireland and far from all traffic  
You found a place that cared not for Zeus, a high ridge faced into west wind  
It was called Slieve League, near Glencolmkille, and it was here you invested  
In a temple home for an Oracle that still serves well. Mortals come from all nations  
and wave-washed islands, leaving with advice and recommendations.

### THE ORACLE AT GLENCOLMKILLE

Garrett Carr

My name is Bridget Gallagher and I grew up on the coast of County Donegal, Ireland. I'm going to tell you what happened when I'd gotten my Leaving Cert results and had to decide what to do with my life. The Leaving Cert is the end-of-school examine and I'd achieved 590 points, the highest score in the country. My photograph was in the Donegal Democrat and all the best universities were offering me places. Everything I knew about Oxford I'd learned from watching 'Inspector Morse' and the thought of those Dons made me anxious. Mammy was not able to be pleased. She didn't want me leaving her behind, taking notions, going off to be a brain surgeon in New York or one of those stockbrokers. She was also afraid a fancy career would deny her the contentment of grandchildren. Keep me just up the lane, with a gaggle of youngsters and an accountancy job somewhere local, that was her hope and intention. Dad, on the other hand, wanted me to take on the world. It was he who pushed

my learning with strict study regimes. He did not care about art or Irish. "Medieval blather" he would say. His focus was Maths, Physics, English and German. He didn't know that I spent loads of my study hours gazing out the window, daydreaming. But still, I did the learning too. 590 points in the Leaving Cert: I'll say no more. This rift between my parents set my life's rhythm. When dad was home it was all timetables and tests, mammy holed up in the kitchen, not saying much to either of us. Then he'd be gone and you could almost see mammy uncoil and reoccupy the house, making three course dinners, keeping the heat on longer and encouraging me to sit down in front of the telly.

So, I was being pulled both ways and I was barely seventeen years of age and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't sleep with the worry.

As everyone is aware, Apollo's temple, home to the Oracle, is on our coast, near the village of Glencolumbkille. I'd never been there but now I decided to visit the Oracle for advice. Dad, of course, hated such superstitious carry-on. Mammy was a good Catholic but flexible enough to see the Oracle had something to offer too. Many solemn churchgoers slipped off occasionally to consult the Oracle. Both my parents insisted in coming for the hour long drive. We set off early one morning, Mammy driving, Dad grumbling in the back seat. The last bit of road up to the temple is fierce dramatic, it clings to the black cliff, high above the Atlantic. Sometimes all you can see through the windscreen is sky and you feel you're about plunge off the world's edge. Close to our destination Mammy told me something I'd never known. She herself had visited the Oracle once, when I was a baby. I was born premature and spent more than two months in a glass tank in Letterkenny Hospital. She had needed to know if I would be limited in some way because of my early arrival. "It was a hard time," Dad said quietly from the back seat. "Like the feeling you get when you see a thirty-foot wave coming at you side-on, except it lasted weeks and weeks."

"Well, that's nice to hear," Mammy said, suddenly enraged. "Yet you took every berth you could get for that whole time, away to sea, and left me to manage alone."

"Keep your eyes on the road," said Dad.

"What did the Oracle tell you?" I asked Mammy.